In The Wake: Black Girl Lessons on Collective Care

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Abstract: This article centers Black girl leadership as a survival guide in this unprecedented moment of combating two pandemics, Covid-19 and extrajudicial killings of Black people. I recall lessons learned during my ethnographic research with Black girls in Chicago in which loss and grieving was often and premature. This piece is a response to Christina Sharpe’s “wake work” conceptualization that challenges the collective care Black people specifically must engage both with our living and dead.

Keywords: Black girlhood; antiblackness; collective care; Black geographies

Introduction/ Theoretical Framework

Initially when I started working on this project, I could not foresee the severity of Black life being even more vulnerable and delicate than it already had. I was reflecting then on antiblackness and Black folks’ proximity to premature death as a sentence from the state for surviving. Like the rest of us, I did not anticipate the timeliness for us, Black people to call on our ancestral wisdoms and invoke our practices of care to carry us through a pandemic caused by COVID-19, a virus outbreak and racial uprisings to follow the summer of 2020. Yet I knew we would show up in the numbers disproportionately of who contracted the disease and those who would die to no fault of our own. The warnings about who identified as most vulnerable to the virus included people with underlying health conditions indirectly named Black people, particularly, poor and working class who move through impoverished communities lacking access to food, healthcare, and job security in addition to the environmental violence brought on by poor air quality and poisoned water. Therefore, this paper intends to explore Christina Sharpe’s (2016) concepts about “wake work” in which she describes it as processes to enact grief and memory through rituals to remember the dead and our relation to them and “as modes of attending to Black life and Black death.” I center the lives of Black girls and their pedagogies of care as an offering to Sharpe’s question, “How might we stay in the wake with and as those whom the state positions to die ungrievable deaths and live lives meant to be unliveable? (pg. 22)”

Uniquely, Black girls are seated at the intersections of state and community violence as a result of racialized gendered oppression. For them, the question about the wake work is more simply asked by Ntozakes Shange, 1974, in her profound play “For Colored Girls Who Have Considered Suicide When the Rainbow was Enuff,” which is posed in the monologue as “who will sing a Black girl song?” Sisterhood, seems to answer the initial question of “who will sing a Black girl song?” It is the same sisterhood that gathered at a kitchen table as Black women genius led to the writing

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of the Combahee River Collective, a critique of the white heteronormative patriarchal capitalist
society that impeded on the rights of people, specifically Black women to be human. It is within
this sisterhood that Black feminism is founded providing a theoretical framework to name our
experiences as we move through systems and communities, as well as a praxis for living; a pedagogy
of care rooted in collectivism.

Collective care is a communal commitment to upheaval oppressive systems to invest in
humanizing relations and processes rooted in love, and deeply informed by Black feminism. It is
wake work, “the modes of attending to Black life and Black suffering,” an embodiment of ancestral
teachings of joy and grief. This labor is to address the harm done to the body and to reclaim the
Black body from subjection as a site of possibility in the ‘after-life.’ It is about self-preservation
rather than individual indulgences. Additionally, it is the practice to continue to create Africa
wherever we are,” or create a ‘homeplace’ under the confines of heavy surveillance and policing.
It is the active pursuit of justice through refusal and protest.

I am centering Black girls in Chicago as fugitive bodies refusing, navigating and reimagining
themselves and their people to examine collective care. Their identities as young, Black and female
forces them to re-Imagine citizenship and attend to their desires through non-traditional means.
Specifically in the context of the neoliberal city, anti-Black frameworks lend us to recognize the
historical trajectory of the subjugation of Blackness in which new processes build from and lend a
more humanizing perspective on the loss experienced by the most marginalized that is not based
solely on monetary value. Yet despite the individualistic and competitive propaganda reinforced
by the neoliberal-carceral state, Black girls remind us of our African/Black ways of togetherness
and humanity through the sisterhoods they cultivate amongst one another and their journey of
remembering.

I examine the praxis of collective care through the lived experiences of Black girls in
Chicago, and their interpretations of Black feminist thought. Therefore, I briefly provide the
context of the city as the epicenter of neoliberalism dependent on carceral operations to repress
and contain Black subjects to introduce Black girl fugitivity both as a site of refusal and possibility
for freedom dreams. Lastly, I lay bare these ideas as a guide for Black liberation for all kinfolk and
a light towards the north star.

Context: The City in the Afterlife

I have a theory
That black girls are born stars
already dead by the time the world finally sees them

The way they make it seem like Amber was the first to go missing

2 Sharpe 2016: 22.
3 Hartman 1997.
4 Paraphrase from quote by Audre Lorde in Lorde and Sanchez 2017.
5 Dillard 2016.
6 Hooks 1990.
"In the Wake" — Reynolds

But every black girl knows the hundreds went missing from countries
To missing from plantations
To missing from the south side of every city
— Anaya and Angelina

There is no doubt that the Black girls collaborators of my research project love being from the Chi, and are curators of its culture. If they aren’t doing the “wop,” eating hot takkis and yelling “Periodt Pooh” they can transform from serving leisure chic looks in sweatpants and tank tops to an embellished gown just to show out for someone’s birthday. While there are similarities to being from the Westside and Southside of the city, they also have cultural differences reflective of class distinctions, migration patterns from the South and disenfranchisement. After the Chicago 1966 riots, a violent event provoked by police brutality on Black youth on the Westside, there has been an intentional disinvestment in revitalizing that part of the city.

Although, your address in the city or spatial location deepens the limitations to access opportunities that increases their quality of life, Black folks in all parts of the city are forced to move through the afterlife of slavery as defined by Hartman, 2008, as, “-skewed life chances, limited access to health and education, premature death, incarceration, and impoverishment.” The removal of Black families in the city has been an ongoing project fostered by Chicago Housing Authority (CHA) dismantling of public housing that dislocated over 800,000 Black families and pushed out over 200,000 out of the city. In 2013, the city experienced the largest closing of public schools at one time in U.S. history, impacting over 90% of Black children.

These realities led to the founding of the Black Girl Free (BGF) a non-profit organization in a community on the west side. As an educator and rape advocate in that community, Ameera, one of the founders of BGF witnessed first-hand the structural violence through an intersectional analysis as she tried to make sense of the troubling statistics of gender violence that implicated Black girls, yet never seen them utilize the rape center that then closed in 2009. Black Girl Free (BGF), an organization committed to centering the healing, art and activism of Black girls that was founded on the sisterhood of two sisters that developed a ‘homeplace’ or ‘fugitive’ space for them to exist fully. I was in the number of these Black women and girls that found a home here as we leaned on one another in navigating the politics of the city and the community conversations that silenced us.

Conversations like the ones articulated by Anaya, 16 and Angelina, 15 in the poem excerpt at the beginning of this section are still too uncomfortable and controversial in community town halls, organizing meetings and at dinner tables. This is indeed the ramifications of racial and gender analyses void of an intersectional lens inclusive of gender, sexuality, disability, and other identity markers. The experiences of Black female bodies are deemed invisible as Black girls go

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7 This Chicago Black girl culture language. Wop is a specific dance. Hot takkies - spicy chips. “Periodt Pooh” is an affirmative statement of agreement with the storyteller.
“missing from the southside of every city” and 1 in 4 become victims of sexual violence by age 18.\(^\text{11}\) This too is part of the “afterlife’ of slavery where Black female bodies are deemed unrapable, and the vulnerable bodies of women and girls are vessels to provide pleasure while simultaneously being denied their desires. Black girls are trusted to carry the burdens of community, while there is rarely any attending to their gardens, their growth.

BGF recognized the genius of Black girls in affirming their roles as leaders in their homes, communities and schools as essential to social transformation as they assessed the peer-to-peer systems or sisterhoods that emerged amongst this population. At the same time, these are adaptive practices initiated in response to the violence of failed traditional systems and relations, and racialized sexist ideologies that recreate mammy and strong Black woman tropes, in addition to sustaining the adultification of Black girls. Adultification of Black children conceptualizes the viewing of Black kids as physically and socially adult-like, therefore are expected to uphold age-inappropriate responsibilities and behaviors. Therefore, Black girls are subjected to Black woman tropes at an early age as they are positioned to take on responsibilities like care for siblings or caretaker for older relatives. Initial theorizations deemed this as a phenomenon solely based on a class issue brought on by low-income/working class families incapacity to nurture children in the same way as their counterparts. Critical Black youth scholarship deepens this analysis to trace the historical denial of Black childhoods on a continuum in which Black people are not seen as human, to then legitimize the criminalization of Black youth in the afterlife.

“Wake Work”

Black girls are expected to do wake work, which is simplified as nurturing tasks through heteronormative patriarchal sexist ideas, especially as mainstream accounts of Black death dominantly feature Black men, as Black women die and never have their names revered. This lack of recognition led to the #SayHerName movement, created to memorialize and advocate for the unjust murders of Black women and girls at the hands of police brutality and intimate violence.\(^\text{12}\) The omission of Black women and girls, along with Black queer and transgendered people increase gaps in our analysis on the development of gender and sexuality while keeping us further from embracing who we were and have become in our survival of white supremacy. This is foundational to neoliberal processes in creating ‘crises’ or dysfunctional conditions while convincing citizens to rely on the very same institutions to remedy the issues they caused (Butler). Black girls’ positionality has facilitated their radical imagination in constructing innovative practices to meet their needs and of those in their communities. They know all too well the failures of the systems, while at the same time providing insight to the possibilities that exist outside of the structures, we feel bound to working within. I learned from our girls in the program at Black Girl Free (BGF) that choosing to live is a radical, dangerous, and intentional act of love and resistance. It is daring to be free in the face of captivity, while understanding that death might serve as a passage to home, figuratively

\(^\text{11}\) Report by the National Center on Violence Against Women in the Black Community https://ujimacommu-

\(^\text{12}\) #SayHerName campaign launched December 2014 by African American Policy Forum (AAPF) and Center

for Intersectionality and Social Policy Studies (CISPS).
and literally.

“Wake Work” requires an epistemic and ontological critical consciousness about Black life and death. Despite the stereotypes of Black women’s over-reliance on the State to care for them, Black women and girls have developed innovative practices to care for one another in the absence of institutions that have historically denied adequate service to this demographic. There is a legacy of Black women organizations including secret societies, sororities, and church groups that while critiquing mainstream human rights movements that excluded them, created their own systems to provide financial, emotional, and social support to one another. Additionally, movements led by Black women and girls typically have benefitted the whole society.\(^{13}\) This is evident when examining contemporary movements that have been at the forefront of social change that have transformed public discourse and political platforms to take up issues like Black maternity health, prison reform/abolition and so on. For example, on the Southside of Chicago, Black young women have been central to organizing for a trauma center to treat gunshot victims with a collective formerly known as Fearlessly Leading the Youth (FLY) and building an organization to train community members to treat gunshot victims on site known as Ujimaa Medics.\(^{14}\)

This next section includes the re-telling of narratives of care as our girls moved through grief and joy. These ethnographic stories are experiences pulled from June 2017- May 2018 leadership institute cohort when I initially joined the program at BGF as a volunteer research fellow invited to facilitate community action research. The work was central to my dissertation research at the time I joined on a volunteer basis. From my time as a volunteer, I shifted to program coordinator. In both phases of my relationship with the organization I employed Black feminist methodology guided by the collective epistemologies of Black women and girls. Over the course of the year, I kept notes about my experience and themes that emerged over time. I hosted reflective conversations with some of the Black women’s adult allies to better understand their lived experiences and the ways it influenced their work with Black girls.

**This Here is for Rekia, Jessica & Kenneka**

So she made a funeral of her own body
A sacrifice to the ones that came before her
And the ones that keep coming or leaving
— Excerpt from Poem by Anaya and Angelina

My first summer at BGF, we had just gathered with the family of Jessica Hampton,\(^{15}\) 25, and other activists in the city to celebrate her birthday at the 47th street Redline Station where she was murdered by her ex-boyfriend a week before the summer program began. We were continuing the tradition of celebrating the life of Rekia Boyd, 22, a Black woman killed by white off-duty police officer in 2012 near a park in the neighborhood where many of our young people lived and attended school. And then, September 10, 2017 we mourned the unresolved death of Kenneka Johnson 2020.

\(^{13}\) Chicago based grassroots organization led by young Black women.

\(^{14}\) This murder occurred in 2016 in Chicago.
Jenkins, 19, whose body was found in a walk-in freezer at an hotel in a suburb of Chicago. The
deaths of these three young Black women represents a loss of Black girlhood, the intersections
of state and community violence and the politics of Black death that deems Black female bodies
invisible. It too uplifts the work of Black women and girls that made sure these young women did
not die in vain. It has challenged our work to question what comes before death for Black girls?

For the most part, our youth were not as familiar with the story of Rekia before the program
and somewhat heard of the details of Jessica’s case, but the loss of Kenneka hit closer to home.
Kenneka was out having a good time at a hotel part with her friends, which is a typical outing for
Chicago young people. They could not wrap their heads around how she first went missing for
24 hours while being out with friends, provoking more commentary around the importance of
sisterhood and taking care of one another. Their concerns and questions alluded to a breaking of
some “girl” code, unwritten social agreements of the ways of sisterhood. For example, agreeing
to leave together or accompanying one another to the bathroom as a protective strategy against
sexual assault or some other unfortunate circumstance that overwhelmingly impacts Black girls.

Loss is inevitable, yet Black loss/death always seems unjust and too soon. Our girls were
carrying the weight of loss, which includes (but is not limited to) the loss of a loved one, loss of
body, loss of childhood or loss of confidence. Loss is a generational and intergenerational matter
the girls and their families inherited because of anti-Black violence in the U.S. that begins with
Africans being stolen by white men and sold into slavery. This reality shaped our approach as
Black women leaders and adult-allies to be more intentional about creating space for grief and joy
outside of the therapy sessions that our young people had access to throughout the day with a Black
woman clinical therapist during the summer program and bi-weekly in the after-school program
during the school year. We had to shift our Black feminist theory of practice to be more explicit in
our application.

Naming & Holding Space for Grief

Our girls embark on a journey to learn about self-care through the work of Audrey Lorde. In
this process the idea of care is radicalized to be understood beyond an act of self-indulgence, but
as a mode of resistance to oppressive systems. In utilizing this pedagogical approach, girls learn
about social movements like #MeToo, #SayHerName, #BlackLivesMatter, and gain exposure
to artists, predominantly Black women artists that have used their platforms for social change.
This engagement with Black feminism and emerging sisterhood encourages them to explore their
curiosity in understanding their Black girlhood, families and their communities that shift from
viewing these spaces through an individualized lens but in connection to others. Through listening
to one another’s stories and discussions they begin to shift to understanding “loss” as an experiential
phenomenon that illuminates structural racism and sexism.

As we experienced collective grief repeatedly, we offered up our own healing practices and
those observed by our grandmothers and mothers as a blueprint to shaping the self-care that was
already part of the end of the day ritual to be even more intentional. We knew grief to live in our
minds, bodies and spirits, so we employed practices and rituals to tend to all of those areas.

16 Loss as a concept the emerged from dissertation findings on Black girlhood.
those additions included altar-making.

**Altar-making**

Tracey, a Black woman healer and artist in our community shared the sacred practice of altar making as interpreted within the Black diaspora across religious and cultural rituals. She made the connection of the altar to other symbolic observances commonly practiced in their community like placing flowers, teddy bears and a person’s favorite things at a public memorial site for someone that died in the neighborhood. After the workshop, we designated a space in the room to display our communal altar to remember those we loved, particularly Black women and girls whom we believed deserved to be celebrated, as our girls filled the sacred table with precious items and photos of those that passed on. They were intentional in adding artifacts in remembrance of Rekia that were her favorite color yellow items, and beautiful stickers that symbolized Jessica’s tattoo.

**Freedom Dreaming**

“I am not yet healed, but when I dance to spirit in the dark I am aspiring to be.”

After viewing Story of a Rape Survivor (SOARS), a multi-media performance based on one of BGF’s founders healing journey, an alumnus of the leadership program and dancer in the production responded with the statement above to an audience members questions about her survivor path. To profess hope in things unseen, as in to radically imagine has been essential in the quest for Black liberation. Therefore, “Wishes for Black Girls” is an exercise we invited parents and allies to join with the girls in reimagining a world where Black girls can exist freely. Black girls are able to manifest the world they want to live in by wishing for Black girls to be protected, confident, happy and so on beyond the white gaze. We have used this exercise as a way for our girls and allies to vocalize their freedom dreams specifically for Black girls as affirmations to the work we must continue to do and to center their desires. After Kenneka’s death they funneled their wishes into a statement that echoed the sentiments of the Combahee River Collective in response to a blog post that was shared widely on social media offering six ways Black girls could better protect themselves. Amid sadness and frustration, Black girls were reminded they have to sing their own song and that the responsibility to end violence against them is on them. Out of their anger, they wrote their own response to the blog post and their communities in a statement titled Six Ways to Stop Killing Black Girls. In the document they put forth clear demands for making the world safer for them to navigate. This is one example of their points:

**#SayHerName**

“Two weeks later, I have not heard very much about Kenneka Jenkins’s case. Black girls’ stories are so invisible; It is hard for the media to feature our stories for more than a sound bite.” Although, we cannot count on the police to bring justice, we as a community must uplift the names of Black girls who are victims of state and community violence.” Quote from ALWH youth
Healing- “Making home wherever they are.”

Black girl play is by far one of the most joyous events for our girls and the adult allies at BGF. It begins with a morning unpacking Black girlhood theoretically to establish our own understandings. We ask the girls to reflect in their journal about a playful memory of them at play, before we share aloud. Before they can get focused on their writing, they asked many questions to clarify the meaning of “play.” The loss of childhood becomes more apparent as the girls express lack of safety in their neighborhood to play outside and a lack of time to take part in such activities. By noon, we walk over to Millennium Park, a famous tourist attraction downtown Chicago, with waterfalls to play in as white middle-class families and visitors allow their children to run around in the water. Like most attractions downtown, this was not created for Black girls to come hang out with music playing on a speaker, jumping Double Dutch and recreating Beyonce music videos in the water, but here we were, as spectators watched intrigued. The sight of Black girls in a group disrupted the social contract of where they are allowed to be and the specified rules for the ways they must behave in that space.

At the same time, the specific rules and regulations placed on Black girl bodies is reinforced each summer as a particular Black woman security guard is tasked with criminalizing our girls by restricting them from writing on the ground with chalk because it is viewed as graffiti on private property or kicking up water at one another. While the rules change each year, it becomes more obvious that the real violation is that the Black girls are loud and playful in what is understood to be White space. We continue to return to this same space each year as a protest to our erasure. The girls assert their right to the city from the shadows of their neighborhoods that keep getting pushed further to the edge of the city. Black girl play in itself is a site of recovering from loss, and an intentional homage to Black girlhood. Sometimes, we draw other Black women and girls that are passing by on lunch from their corporate jobs to jump in who try to remember the rhythm of the rope before hopping in. The jump rope seems to be a place of reclaiming the disciplined body, and lost girlhoods. A mutual grounding for intergenerational healing from collective grief.

Discussion

I could have continued with more examples of the ways Black girls employed “wake work,” although I hope the examples above lead us to learn from the way Black girls create safer spaces for them to be leaders. Our young women’s commitment to Rekia, Jessica and Kenneka motivated them to embrace their own Black girlhood and more implicitly honor Black lives while living. The duality of the altar making, and Black girl play captures the redress of the body and often echoes the mood of an actual wake for a dead person in which healing is found in tears and laughter. Their refusal to forget Black young women that die, is a protest to their invisibility. Furthermore, each time a Black girl chooses to “do the most” or do nothing at all, take up space, side-eye or laugh loud is evidence that oppression has not defeated us.

We are in the afterlife of slavery, constantly feeling and watching death, but we don’t only have to die here or live complacently. Our girls’ questions and concerns around the strange details about Kenneka’s death and her friendships allude to a Black girl code founded on a praxis of care. It should cause us to re-evaluate healing work that is not rooted in collective care and provide
context to implementing healing processes deemed culturally relevant for Black folks.

**Conclusion**

As we sit in this period of uncertainties, I am reflective of my time in Chicago hanging on the Westside as Danielle (one of the girls in the program) prepared for her prom send off, a pre-celebration at the home for the person attending prom. I pulled up to the house carrying a wicker peacock chair that was requested for picture taking, as her family sat outside barbequing, playing games, and setting up decorations. As she waited closer to departure, she sat in her living room in a robe and once she was ready to put on her gown, about 8 of the women in her family surrounded her as they helped to ease on her dress. Once she was dressed the family poured affirmations into her as she stood there looking stunning. Often the images of working-class families hosting elaborate prom send offs illicit a racialized class judgement about the use of money or questions about that child’s worthiness to have such a grand celebration through commentary about grades and college acceptance. However, I implore that these commentaries overlook Black girls’ abilities to bring together their families and communities to leverage resources and contacts. It misses the opportunity to partake in the celebration of the living. These skills and other Black girls’ wisdoms will very much be needed no matter what the future holds as we face more loss.

**References**


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